

Interview with AdS by Guido Caserza, *Il Mattino*, Naples, 27/9 2015

Genocidal killing sprees have taken more than 100 million lives since the late 19th century. General opinion is that – as you write in your book – that mass murderers are all beasts, monsters, or psychopaths. Do you agree?

This is indeed the naïve conception of mass murderers. It is sometimes expressed in the popular press. Of course there are also a few psychopaths and sadists among the perpetrators. But I have never come across a serious student of mass murder who believed that they were monsters’.

How is possible that so much people are enrolled in the service of evil? What causes genocidal social attitudes to arise and become acceptable?

The answer requires the 100,000 words in my book. But If you want it in twenty words: because one group increasingly comes to see the other group as very different, incompatible, threatening, and finally as ‘less than human’.

And what about the perpetrators themselves? Are they merely and only the product of external circumstance?

This is the prevalent opinion, also among scholars. And yes, circumstance, or situation, always has a great impact. But that is not the entire story.

What do you think about the “situationist view.” I mean the cliché “You or I, under the same circumstance, might have done the same thing”: it should be the immediate situation that causes “ordinary

people” to “commit extreme evil.” I think this means to absolve the perpetrators of personal responsibility.

First, of all you and I are not under the same circumstances. The supposition is what is called in logic a ‘counterfactual’ and therefore its truth can not be determined. Second, it is also a ‘counterintuitive’ (I made up this term). One can not imagine what it is like to kill, dozens, hundreds, thousands of people, not for an hour, a week, but sometimes for months or years. Third, we do not know much about perpetrators. Mass murder is the safest job on the planet. Very few are ever brought before their judges (Only when the genocidal regime is completely defeated: Nazi Germany, Rwanda...Serbia). It is impossible to do ‘field research’ in genocidal situations. Almost everything we know about the murderers, we know from the small minority that did in fact appear in court, and there of course, they tried to appear as innocent, ignorant, unmotivated, uncommitted, in one word ‘banal, as they could.

What’s your opinion about Hannah Arendt describing Adolf Eichmann as the very embodiment of ‘the banality of evil’, just another ordinary man?

I limit myself to the Eichmann book: Arendt let herself be totally misled by Eichmann’s clever presentation of himself as just another little bureaucrat. Already at the time of the trial, it was well known that Eichmann was the opposite: an obsessive antisemite and a fanatic Jew hunter (who, he said ‘would jump laughing in his grave at the thought that he had murdered six million Jews’ – how is that for banality?). Arendt built her entire theory on the case of one man, and in that one case she turned out to be completely mistaken. But she never admitted her errors, and for her followers it apparently doesn’t matter at all. This can happen only in theology or philosophy, whenever facts don’t count.

So, why one person becomes a war criminal while another does not, if it depends not on circumstances?

it also depends very much on circumstance. I, too am a moderate 'situationist'. But that is not the whole story. People are different. Some people are more prone to 'get themselves' into genocidal situations. And once they are in such a situation, some try to do as little harm as possible, others kill with zest and abandon. So, most genocidal murderers differ in certain respects and to a certain degree from most other people. The differences are gradual, they are a matter of statistical distribution.

As to these differences: Perpetrators do have a moral conscience, but it is more easily limited to their 'own kind' and excludes 'the others' as beyond the pale of moral obligation. Perpetrators tend not to see themselves as the actors in their own life: things 'happen to them' and 'they are made to do things'; they have a weaker sense of 'agency', as the English expression goes, and therefore they feel they cannot be held responsible for what they have done. And finally, perpetrators have hardly any compassion for their victims, not even long after the facts. Pity is one sentiment they could and can not afford.

If the complete explanation is in the situation, then people are no longer responsible for their acts. But if a defective psychological makeup is the complete explanation, they can not be held responsible either for those 'defects', inborn or from early childhood. In other words, we are always more than our circumstances and more than our traumas; that is what makes us a person, someone who can be held to account for his or her own deeds (to some degree).

How is it possible that genocidaires are devoted to their families and apparently normal people in the ordinary life?

Because they are quite capable of having loving and moral sentiments for their own, immediate circle. Their conscience stops beyond that circle.

Many of the survivors of genocide and the veterans of war suffer from post traumatic disorders. The mass murderers – apparently – do not. This is a great enigma. But, the perpetrators did not have to fear for their lives every moment of the day, for years at a stretch, as the others did, who suffered the consequences. Yet, after the genocide, the genocidaires are despised as cowards and brutes, who do not deserve

the respect that soldiers, even on the losing side, deserve. The perpetrators usually live with the secret of their past deeds. I suspect that they must keep their past a secret even to themselves: 'repression'. But there is very little evidence of these presumed 'inner conflicts.' The paradox is: if the mass murderers can live with their horrendous past without any problems, then indeed they are very different from other people.

Was the Nazi state really an efficient, cool, totalitarian machine?

No. This mechanical, industrial, rational image is what the Nazis themselves wanted to project. And they have succeeded quite well. In fact it was a gory, bloody, barbaric, murderous mess.

How could in the future episodes of mass murder be averted? (could it happen again in our societies?)

I wish I could say something that wasn't known already. But all I can say is that one must be wary of politicians who sow hatred and contempt for 'other' people. And that one should try to see how we all are of the same cloth. Today's refugees certainly are a nuisance, some of them may be devious, noisy, filthy, even smelly, they may have an alien faith and detestable opinions, speak an incomprehensible language and have annoying customs. But they are human like us and we must try to treat them humanely. I guess you already knew that.